

“ We are all experiencing what we can call collective trauma right now, as the wave of this elusive Covid-19 pandemic moves across the entire world and shatters the basic fabric of society. All other living things sigh a deepened breath as capitalism in this country falters. This historical moment has opened up the opportunity for both social and economic aspects of our daily lives to take on new pathways for connection and mutual aid, as we continue to experience the weirdness of physical distancing and the ambiguous loss of what we have known as day-to-day life.

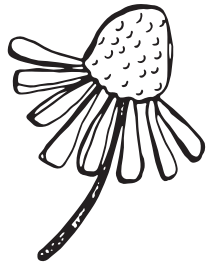


Surviving a Pandemic:

*Tools for Addressing
Isolation, Anxiety and Grief*



For more information or resources contact:
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TOOLS FOR OUR END OF LIFE CARE

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SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN CONSIDERING A HCPOA:

Can this person do the job that I am asking of them? Are they the type of person who can/would advocate for me? How comfortable are they making emotional decisions under stress? How likely are they to answer the phone in an emergency situation? Do they live close by or are they available to travel to get to me? How well does this person know me? Have I asked them if they'd be willing to do this for me?

SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN CONSIDERING THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE FUTURE:

- What are things that I feel regretful about that you could resolve today or in the short term?
- Are there letters that I want to write? Things that I want to apologize for?
- Write down three experiences I want to start working towards now. Who would be with me?
- Are there any belongings that I want to make sure a certain person gets when I'm gone? Is there anything that I want to get rid of today?
- What would my funeral sound, taste, smell, look and feel like?
- If I could do anything with my body when I die, what would it be?
- Are there life-extension interventions I never want used to keep me alive? What if I am still conscious and able to communicate?

Each of us find ourselves in a new era in which we must figure out together how to navigate life amidst a worldwide pandemic. We are all experiencing what we can call collective trauma right now, as the wave of this elusive Covid-19 pandemic moves across the entire world and shatters the basic fabric of society. All other living things sigh a deepened breath as capitalism in this country falters. This historical moment has opened up the opportunity for both social and economic aspects of our daily lives to take on new pathways for connection and mutual aid, as we continue to experience the weirdness of physical distancing and the ambiguous loss of what we have known as day-to-day life.





It is a worldwide collective human experience to be moving in and out of moments of stress and uncertainty as we try to navigate life with this virus. At the same time, this pandemic is not a unique event; it is part of the new normal in this global economy. Viruses will continue to spread as long as we go on upsetting the ecological balance of the planet. Yet what we have been through so far could help us to figure out how to build more of the society we want together as we move into the future. While this may feel difficult, it's important to remember that we do have agency—together, we can build a meaningful life in the rubble of the parts that we must leave behind.

This text is a small effort to help hold each other up in the process of this collective readjustment as we continue to fight in pursuit of the dreams we have for the world. We offer a look at the importance of moving through the many aspects of grief with some suggestions as to how we can prepare for the unknown ahead. We provide several somatic exercises aimed at facilitating our ability to ground ourselves in uncertain futures while also finding creative ways to get connection and expand the imagination in spite of the need for increased physical distancing.

TOOLS FOR OUR END OF LIFE CARE

Giving thought towards the desires we have for our end of life is an important way to prepare for the unknown and care for ourselves, as well as those we love.



WHAT IS AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE/LIVING WILL?

An advance directive (also known as a living will) is a state-specific legal document that declares your healthcare wishes should you become unable to make those decisions for yourself. It can include different kinds of medical intervention that you do or do not want (for example CPR, artificial nutrition/hydration, intubation, or surgery). You can get these forms for free online or from your doctor, if you have one. This document can be revoked at any time as long as you are cognitively able to do so, and must be notarized to be considered applicable. It will ask you to name someone as your health care agent/health care power of attorney.

WHAT IS A HEALTHCARE POWER OF ATTORNEY (HCPOA)?

This is a person that you select to make all of your health care decisions when you cannot do it for yourself. This will be the person that you share as many details with as possible about what you want for your care. This doesn't have to be a single person, as you can set up secondary and tertiary agents as well. Make it known if you want them to act as a collective, because at the end of the day, your primary will have all of the decision-making power unless you specify otherwise. Make sure that you get consent before selecting someone for this role, as it can be a lot to put onto someone who may not feel comfortable making these kind of high stakes decisions.

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IDEAS FOR CREATING RITUAL AROUND LOSS

It's important to foster collective intention during this time of more physical distance.

- Light and burn candles at a planned time.
- Read poems aloud. Record them to send to each other.
- Host bonfires and share stories. You can still do this while maintaining a safe distance and wearing masks.
- Choose objects with which to create an altar for remembrance or transition, so that people can gather and witness together.
- Develop a memorial ritual honoring your loved one, like picking a bouquet of flowers, for your loved one on special days.

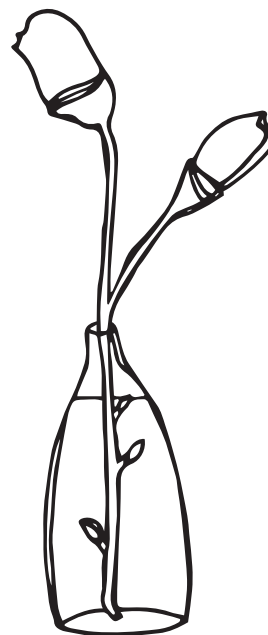
Ritual can also be individual and can help give you a feeling of control over your environment at times when that's otherwise hard to get. Controlling things that only affect you, such as the structure of your day, the order in which you do certain things, or the arrangement of your things in a personal space, for example, can help you feel more grounded.

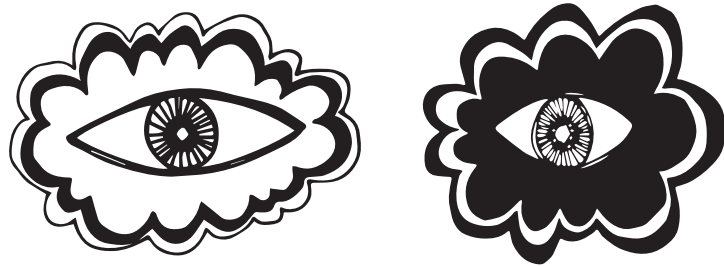
Many of us are experiencing a dramatic increase in the amount of time we're at home with our loved ones, and it's very important that we avoid taking out our feelings on them. Giving ourselves creative and intentional ways to deal with our need for control, such as focusing on ritual, can help keep us from hurting or conflicting with those around us.

Some of us are in shock. Some of us are anxious. Whatever feelings and mental states you are moving through right now, you make a lot of sense. We are each in our own ways experiencing what is known as *ambiguous loss*. This collective experience of Covid-19 occurred without any sort of closure to our lives before a pandemic. None of us have a clear understanding of what this means for our day-to-day life. We don't know how we will make money into the future. Unplanned loss can overwhelm our coping abilities, making normal functioning extremely difficult. We have to figure out new ways to live and structure our lives. This can leave us anxious in moments, and perhaps complicate or delay our process of moving through the loss in order to adapt more easily to the changes. And with that, we have the potential to also be experiencing the anticipatory grief of the impending loss of loved ones because of the pandemic. **None of us are alone in this.**

Because of the way our threat response cycle works as humans, we are having a harder time being able to orient to what the threat is because the future is so unknown to us right now. Further, we are even more so hyper-focused on our phones and screens, trying to get both information and connection to help settle us, (to help us gather a sense of control and comprehend a path forward), yet this does not calm our nervous system. Our brainstem is designed to find threat, usually scanning far out into the distance before moving up close to our present surroundings. Our nervous systems have more of a tendency towards a heightened state because our present environment is giving us the potential of dangerous information and swiftly changing news.

Our immune systems are deeply interconnected with our nervous systems, and our stress levels impact both of these. In particular, extended periods of shutdown strain our immune function. We hope that some of these tools can help move you towards settling your nervous system, as well as towards the mobilization many of us seek.





Inherently, social isolation is a risk factor, as it compromises our mental and physical health. As we are in a new social context, it is very important that we direct intention towards connection with other people. The use of screens and video chats can cause an extreme strain on our attachment system. We must make more of an effort to nudge ourselves towards facial expression, making eye contact and modulating our tone of voice with others. We must imagine windows where there are walls. It is important that each of us not begin to normalize the fear of others to a deeper extent than we already experience in our individualized society. Implementing these practices make a difference and can help combat against fear-based interactions with friends and strangers alike.

One way that we can reduce stress and harm to ourselves and each other is to practice good consent when interacting with others. For example, take the time to figure out what you want your personal boundaries to be when you interact with others. Do you need to be six feet or more away from people? Do you need them to be wearing masks if they want to talk to you? Do you feel comfortable sitting next to someone? Is touching toes acceptable? If so, under what conditions?

Ask yourself questions like these and make your feelings known to others. This will help to prevent people from accidentally crossing a boundary that they weren't aware that you had. It can also help to reduce the kind of self-policing that can happen when people feel scared and uncertain, enabling everyone involved to be able to trust that everyone around them is being thoughtful about their boundaries and needs.



PREPARING FOR EVERY POSSIBILITY

The experience of this pandemic can remind us that we are never quite sure of what is going to happen. One of the best gifts we can give to each other is the difficult conversations necessary to prepare for the unknown. We encourage you to talk with your friends and family about your desires in case of serious illness. Each of us is able to have more control and autonomy over the things we want if we were to get sick or die. Write down what you will want if you are dying and what you want after your death. We offer some of the logistical aspects of how to do so. Be as specific as you feel able to be. It's an immense relief for friends and family to not have to make such significant decisions for you when the time comes and you are unable to make them for yourself. Preparing for these things removes the inevitable second-guessing that can occur, even to those who know your desires best. You are never too young or too old to make these things happen.

As we adjust to the unknown aspects of the pandemic, we attempt to provide some information on how to have more autonomy over the decisions for our care if we are sick or dying. In an effort of trying to care for ourselves and each other, we pose questions for each of us to consider about having more autonomy over our health care options. We hope that having more knowledge about these sorts of preparations will add to our agency during this time when so much feels uncertain.

Our bodies can get stuck in habitual patterns in which some areas are extra tight or tense, while other areas can become absent from our awareness altogether. In order to shift these states, we have to become aware of them. An excellent way to do this is to create and release tension intentionally. This exercise brings attention to what your nerves are usually doing unconsciously, enabling you to begin to shift those patterns.

an exercise **PROGRESSIVE BALANCING**

From a standing position and with your eyes closed (if comfortable), begin to tense up areas of your body as you allow yourself to breathe, counting slowly to 8 and holding the tension quite strongly. Then, slowly let go of the tension as you exhale, imagining that the body area is expanding or taking up more space, as if all of the cells are growing. Then after the next breath in, exhale for a count of 8, imagining that the body area is relaxing—melting like butter. Move back and forth twice between tensing and relaxing for each area. Be sure to allow for a few natural breath cycles between the two states.

Start by tensing your **neck and throat**. Many of us can hold tension in our necks, sometimes keeping rigid in an effort towards the control of situations. It is a great place to gain back some ease. After doing this twice, rest a moment. Second, tense your **shoulders, arms and hands**, a bit like being ready to fight. Notice your muscles, and any sensations of strength in your own body now. Feeling your arms can give us a sense of how much space you can take up.

Third, tense your **belly**. Many people feel a tense knot in their upper bellies connected to anxiety, while others feel an emptiness or lack there. Connecting to sensing your belly can start restoring a sense of depth of experience and quietness at just being. Finally, tense your **legs and feet**. Lots of us feel quite separated from our legs, which can be a source of feeling our strength, standing our ground, or feeling the power to run away if we need to.

After all of this tensing and relaxing, do an extra swinging movement to make sure you discharge any excess tension. Stand and turn your upper body side to side, as if you're looking over first your right shoulder and then your left, gently rotating your whole upper body along the way. Let your arms be floppy and follow the movement, letting them swing out in front of you and then knock gently at your sides at the end of each twist. You can relax your knees a little, and let your hips join the turning movement. Feel the gentle twist of your spine as you move. Do this for a minute or two.

Self-touch is a useful tool, especially right now when we are getting less physical contact. Making a low “vu” sound encourages our nervous system to down-shift towards a more balanced state, bringing a sense of cohesion to our organs and body as stress and shut down responses can affect our digestion. The particular sound comes out of the lower trunk part of our body. When we bring attention towards feeling the sound as it comes in from below our diaphragm, it helps us to reset.

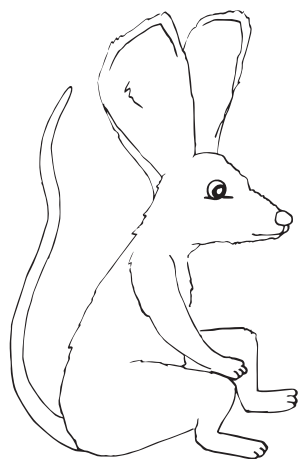
There is significant difference between a forced breath and one that arises spontaneously. Instead of taking an intentional deep breath, allow yourself to make a full exhale, and as you do so, notice the quality of settling as your body comes into balance.

You can try to pay attention throughout your day for when you let out a deep breath, a sigh. This slow, audible exhalation is an everyday experience that is a body and mind resetter. We spontaneously sigh many times an hour as our nervous system resets and regulates.

an exercise **SELF HUG WITH A ‘VU’ SOUND**

Place your right hand under your left armpit, close to your heart. Then place your left hand on your right shoulder. Notice the warmth of your body. Invoke a sense of containment. Pay attention to see if you experience any sort of ease settle in your chest, or if you get a spontaneous deeper breath or a natural breath that comes back in. Then, when ready, slowly inhale, and on the exhale, let all your air out slowly with a “vu” sound, like that of a low foghorn. Repeat this three times slowly. Imagine your brain moving down into your pelvis, like an ice cube melting, flowing down to help regulate your nervous system. And finally, just be curious about what you notice. Has anything shifted? Do you notice your attention more available?



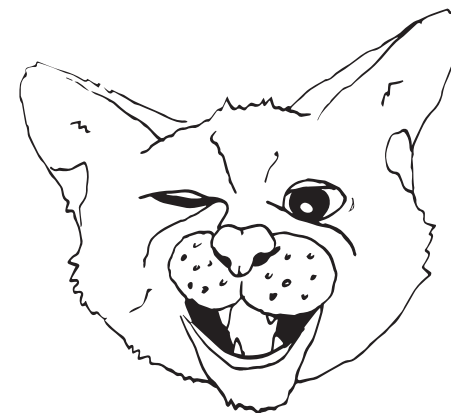


In our modern situation, and especially with the sudden need to care for each other with physical distancing, we spend a lot of time in focal vision, where we move focused attention from one object to the next. It is helpful to extend our peripheral awareness and gain a greater sense of physical perspective as we adjust to the context we each find ourselves in. Staring at screens, or even printed material, is a fairly recent human invention. Before industrialism the vast majority of people would not have spent such a significant part of their time looking at things so close up. We evolved in the savannah. Human evolution led us to coming out of the trees to stand upright. To support those changes, our system appreciates being able to see over long distances, even in the city scape. It is from the point of farthest contact that we get a more softened and expansive awareness, while still maintaining a sense of awareness. Our goal is to embody a state of relaxed alertness, able to access a wide range of responsiveness in any given moment.

an exercise
EXTENDING YOUR GAZE

To begin, let your eyes go where they want to go. Allow your eyes to wander slowly. Take a moment or two to do so, and be curious about what you notice. Then, begin to look for the thing you can see that is the farthest away. It might take effort to counteract the reduced focal length, but take a moment to play with that. What's the farthest thing away from you that you can see right now? As you find that object, notice how your eyes soften, how the muscles in your face relax. Perhaps you notice a natural deeper inhale or exhale.

Then, slowly extend your arms out in front of you and move them outward to the edges of what is just within your peripheral view. Once you have found that spot, turn your palms in and slowly wiggle your fingers. As you again find that object at the point farthest away from you, notice your eyes soften. Allow your eyes to rest and touch into a deeper sense of centering. Begin to notice the ability of holding both relaxed vision and attention to the movement of your fingers. It is from this place that you are in balance with a relaxed alertness, ready to respond to threat from an underlying state of relaxation.



It's important to make space to express our feelings of agitation, rage or grief. The goal of this exercise is to legitimize and tend to these feelings, giving them both permission and expressive release. When we engage our facial muscles, it helps downshift and regulate our nervous system. We are better able to communicate, as well as read other faces better too.

an exercise
FACE ATTENTION

Begin by directing your attention towards your face. Slowly scrunch up the muscles in your face until they are as tight as possible, and hold for a moment. Then release the muscles. After a few natural breath cycles, move to widen and extend your face outward. Open your mouth and stretch your cheeks. Hold for a moment and then rest. Move back and forth between these states several times.

Then when ready, as you hold a sense of any feelings that want attention and movement, begin again to scrunch up your face, bringing awareness to your eyes and nose and scrunch harder, letting the anger know that it's okay to be there. Perhaps you get a spontaneous settling breath. Then use your eyes to direct a piercing glare; bare down on your teeth slightly. Allow any sort of rumble or sound to make its way out of your mouth. When ready, allow your face to return to a neutral state, allowing your eyes to soften. Repeat a couple times, if it feels desirable.